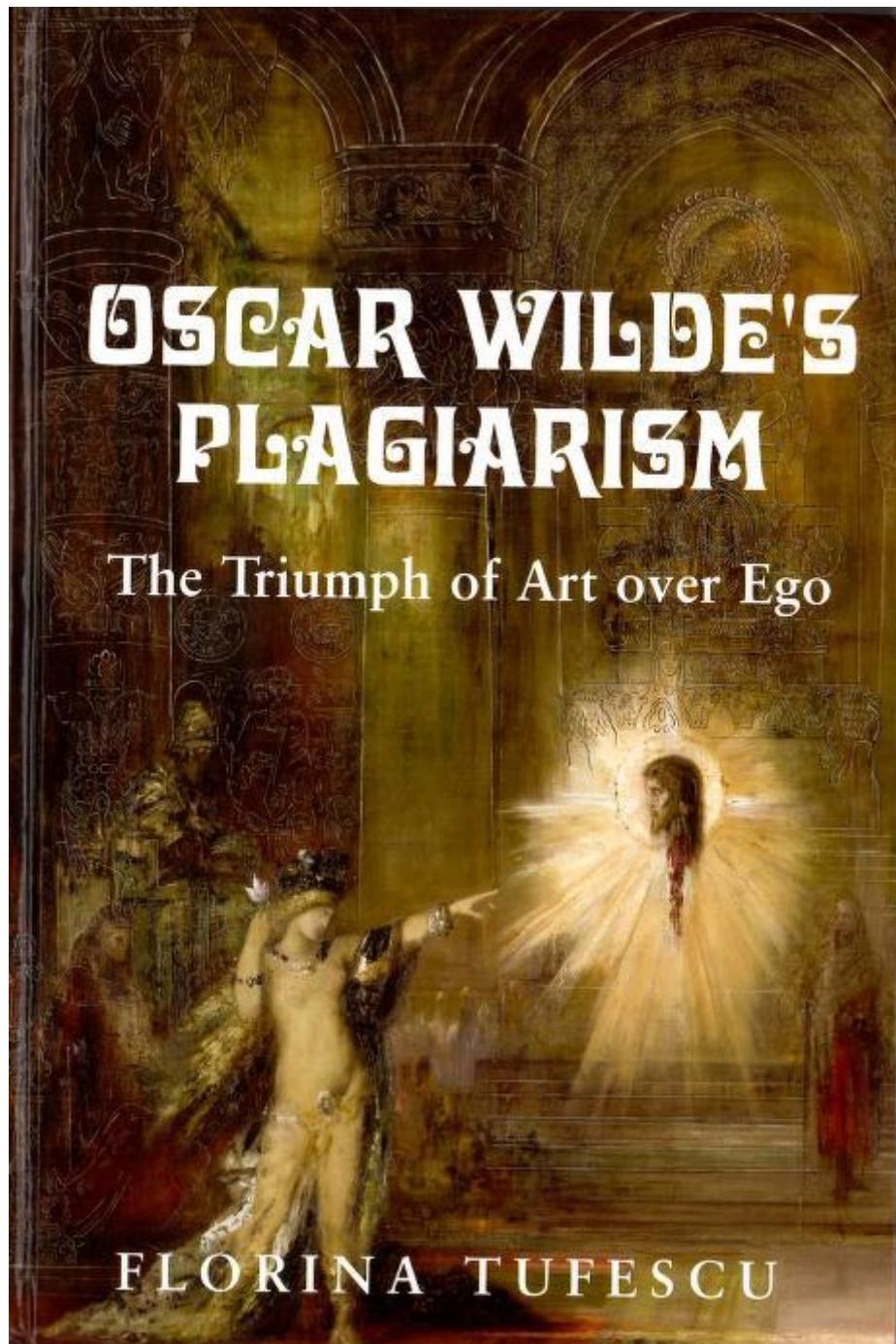


**“Oscar Wilde’s Decadent Plagiarism: The Spectacular Restoration of Classical Theory and Practice” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter)**

**Full transcript of Declan Kiberd’s report, 1 July 2005, University of Exeter. Published in revised form as *Oscar Wilde’s Plagiarism: The Triumph of Art over Ego* (Irish Academic Press, 2008).**



## **Full transcript of the external examiner's report, 1 July 2005, University of Exeter**

The candidate has produced a thesis that is not only outstanding but entertaining. It argues that rows over plagiarism are really a rehash of the old war between classicists and romanticists. The work of Poe, Baudelaire and Pater is interpreted as part of a counter-romantic modernist reaction against romantic cults of originality. Wilde's poems are taken not as abjectly derivative but as consciously so, in order to draw attention to the question of form and surface. Shakespeare is seen as a model for Wilde's thefts, in the spirit of a decadent plagiarism which is meaningful because counter-romantic and not just a mere copying.

The core thesis is pretty persuasive. One could, of course, argue that there are other important elements in Wilde's strategy e.g. the desire to return to the folkloristic impersonality of an oral culture which he, as a socialist committed to ideals of common ownership, might have been expected to endorse. The candidate plausibly suggests that Wilde's use of hoary old plots may have been motivated by a desire to insert under this protective cover a more subversive knowledge designed to defeat the official censors—but surely the plots creak with an over-obviousness which is itself a parody of the determinist philosophy which Wilde abhorred? Ms Tufescu concedes that there are few new ideas under the sun, yet artists have to pretend that some of theirs are original—this seems a version of the paradox with which even good teachers confront their students: “be like me, but be not too like me”. In any revision of this thesis for book publication, she might want to address the ways in which this tactical concealment of indebtedness may be itself a version of all teacher/student relationships. She might also ask why it is those very critics who lacerate one another with allegations of plagiarism who are often to the fore in praising artists for their use of derived materials. Perhaps those artists, such as DM Thomas, whose work has been bitterly attacked, come into prominence for their use of scholarly material (e.g. Freud) rather than for their liftings from other artists? The candidate rightly observes that academics in general seem far more queasy on the topic than artists.

She is right to contend that current copyright law reflects romantic theory, but surely it also reflects the academic consensus, which is itself bound up with notions of bourgeois property rights? It may be worthwhile further to psychologise the thesis by asking an avowedly ‘romantic’ question—whether a desire for death or for some form of self-extinction may lie behind the act of plagiarism. This is askable because the thesis clearly shows that many plagiarists use sources much as Wilde uses derived plots—with an obviousness that seems designed to be noticed and to lead to their arraignment. Wilde says that once an author shows himself capable of originality, then theft is

allowable—but the other way of putting this is to ask why so many truly gifted and creative artists, from Wilde to Thomas, have been willing to risk moral and cultural ridicule when they were quite capable of generating their own material.

The argument that romanticists are simply classicists who know how to conceal their debts is delicious; and the use of the Chatterton example superb. I admire the range of reference all through the thesis, both before and after the “Wilde Era”. One effect is to centralize Wilde, between Baudelaire and Eliot, as the arch-modernist. The candidate shows how Baudelaire admired Poe for his frustration of the tastes of a romantically-inclined audience, and how Baudelaire saw his own plagiarism of Longfellow as a case of ‘rescuing’ material for recontextualisation. The classical notion that any borrowing which is ‘improved’ is thereby justifiable raises another interesting possibility which might be teased out—whether plagiarism may have more in common with theories of translation than of parody. There is no doubt that Andrew Lang was right in saying that anyone successful is called a thief by the small-minded, but does this envy arise more at times of literary famine than of literary feast?

I admired the radical reinterpretation of Wilde’s poetry as, among other things, a challenge to the idea of past masters being inimitable. While he did manage to foreground the question of form, surely the production of ‘boring’ content was a dubious way of doing this—hardly an assured basis for calling him a modernist (67-8)? The notion that he wished to emphasize the poem as a made thing, an artifact, seems far more promising and accords well with his use of plot in drama. That said, the treatment of ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ is brilliant, not least in the tracing of echoes in Camus’s The Outsider. One of the deepest among the many pleasures afforded by this thesis is its polymorphous blending of texts in subtle but unexpected ways. Another is its resolutely Wildean critical method, as in the claim that Wilde was seeking to exclude bad poetry and genuine feeling from ‘The Ballad of Reading Gaol’ when this noble process was brutally curtailed by the financial pressure to publish. I also liked the idea that Yeats’s truncated version completed this job—a nice illustration of my theory that Wilde’s texts may be subject to refinement by the impersonal folk tradition upheld by Irish writers.

The account of the revolution wrought in Shakespearean criticism around the issue of plagiarism is masterful; and the analysis of The Portrait of Mr W H is consequently deepened and enriched. The argument that Wilde is representing plagiarism (rather than practising it) is one possible answer to the question I put earlier as to why even gifted artists leave themselves open to allegation. The analogies between the Cyril of “The Critic as Artist” and the Stephen Dedalus of Ulysses (as young

men ‘trying to fascinate an audience, interrupted by various intertextual echoes’) are well pursued and might be taken further e.g. both men disown their own theory, having perfected it. The idea of the Joycean text as caught in the interstices between plagiarism and allusion is brilliant and a wonderful explanation of his French use of the dash rather than of direct quotation marks. Wonderful too is the mischievous view of Joyce as one who endorses Shakespeare’s plagiary but not his ‘insufficient mastery’ of sources.

The chapter on Sardou, Ibsen and Shaw works very well, allowing for some clever reinterpretations of famous plays, even as it permits the candidate to widen the thesis with such questions as whether a letter belongs finally to the sender or receiver. Mrs Cheveley in An Ideal Husband is convincing as the ultimate authorial fantasy, leaving the stage with a stolen bracelet which looks better than on its earlier owner, with ‘use’ as the justification for theft. (Mind you, the British justified their seizure of Irish land on the same basis—that they would work it far better than the natives—and Wilde’s acceptance of the ‘improvement’ argument seems to have stopped short when the issue was posed in colonialist terms). The reading of The Man of Destiny by Shaw as Wildean as much as Napoleonic is cunning, though I still can’t see how the introduction of the Wildean biographical element weakens the drama as drama (138). This argument needs to be better explained, or else amended. The idea that Shaw is suggesting that Wilde could have read the Marquis’s letter and then pretended not to have seen it is tantalising.

Commentary on Ibsen is generally strong, exposing his pose as an influence-free romantic artists and his later attempts to critique the same romantic ideal. Even more than Wilde, he emerges as the playwright who embodies at once the romantic and the counter-romantic phases of art in a single long career. The equation of children and books/manuscripts established in Hedda Gabler is given an even more comic turn in The Importance of Being Earnest—and the candidate will surely have noticed a more tragic turn in Yeats’s autobiography and poetry (‘Pardon Old Fathers’). To take Dorian Gray as an imitation of the realist mode disrupted by inserts from other textual worlds seems hugely clever, especially in its portrayal of realists as unintentionally comic (Dorian’s use of empirical explanations of events as more ‘convenient’ than the ‘plausible’ marvellous explanations). I am willing to believe that Wilde is indeed laughing at modern literal-mindedness, though here, as sometimes elsewhere, I can’t help noticing that Wilde gets the benefit of every doubt e.g. because the realist frame is disrupted and not replaced by any other, Dorian Gray is hailed as an intergeneric and modernist, though the book might as easily have been called incoherent and an artistic failure. At

various moments in the thesis, there seems to be a thin enough line drawn between plagiarism and representations of it. But Wilde as a man of the eighteenth century who conceded occasionally to the games of the symbolists covers a multitude.

The core thesis is nonetheless conclusive: as Leavitt put it, without textual intercourse there could be no literature. The paranoia of scholars has skewed most debates and left artists at times over-defensive and over-apologetic. Better by far the strong-mindedness of Nietzsche who understood that in order to act boldly in the world (i.e. to create), one had to do a lot of strategic ‘forgetting’. The role of unconscious plagiarism, such as Nietzsche appears to advocate in his essay on history and historical progress, might merit more consideration, as might Walter Benjamin’s ideas on citation (which may just be a developed version of ‘rescuing’, but the question needs airing). The candidate suggests that no author has suffered financially or psychologically as a result of plagiarism but it might be worth looking at careers which have been damaged or destroyed by the allegation. In the meantime, this thesis triumphantly establishes that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

Unlike most dissertations, this was an immensely enjoyable read which wore its learning lightly; it was filled with clever phrases, such as its notion of plagiarism as originality’s dark double (‘the supremely undesirable illustrating the ultimately unattainable’); much of it—despite the central thesis—was new to me; and what wasn’t new often wasn’t true either, so that was OK. It is an outstanding piece of work and should make a very successful book, which might help to curb the scholarly paranoia about plagiarism and which might be read well beyond the academy.

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